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COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES  
WASHINGTON D C 20548

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OEO

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JUL 10 1970

Dear Mr. Chairman

We have reviewed certain activities of volunteers of the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) assigned to the Northeast South Dakota Community Action Program, Inc. (agency), a community action agency at Sisseton, South Dakota, funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The review was undertaken pursuant to a December 30, 1969, telephone request from Mr. W. E. O'Brien of your Committee staff. Mr. O'Brien's request was initiated because of information received by Senator Karl Mundt that the volunteers assigned to the agency (1) were not productively employed, (2) were misusing Government-owned vehicles assigned to them, and (3) were a disruptive influence on the community.

Our review covered those aspects of the volunteers' activities that had been called to our attention and did not include an evaluation of the efficiency with which the agency administered its programs or the extent to which the program objectives were being achieved. Our review of VISTA volunteers' activities covered the period from July 1968, when the first volunteer was assigned to the agency, through February 1970, when our fieldwork was completed. We reviewed pertinent OEO and agency documents and held interviews with OEO and agency officials, volunteers assigned to the agency, local political leaders, local police, newspaper and business officials, and a number of area residents.

The majority of our work was performed at the agency at Sisseton, however, we also performed work at the OEO Denver, Colorado, Regional Office and obtained pertinent vehicle records from the General Services Administration (GSA) regional office in Kansas City, Missouri, and the GSA motor pool in Bismarck, North Dakota.

The agency was formed in 1966 to serve Day, Marshall, and Roberts Counties, an area of about 3,000 square miles in the northeast section of South Dakota. Within this area is the Sisseton-Wahpeton Indian Reservation. In August 1968 the agency reported to OEO that the total population for the three-county area was about 30,000. On the basis of agency information, we estimated that the total Indian population, on and off the reservation, was about 2,500.

From the time of its first grant in April 1966 through February 1970, OEO provided the agency with funds totaling about \$1.1 million for community action programs. In July 1968, OEO approved the agency's first VISTA project and assigned two volunteers to the agency to assist in planning

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and developing community activities. In August 1968 the agency requested OEO to assign additional volunteers to support the agency's efforts in assisting the poor in the area. OEO approved the request and in October 1968 assigned 11 additional volunteers to the agency. From July 1968 through January 1970, a total of 30 volunteers had been assigned to the agency, the highest number at any one time being 25 in June 1969. Through January 31, 1970, OEO had approved grants of about \$93,000 for the agency's VISTA projects.

#### PRODUCTIVE EMPLOYMENT OF VISTA VOLUNTEERS

We were unable to make a complete assessment of whether the volunteers assigned to the agency had been productively employed during the first several months of their assignments because pertinent records and reports had not been maintained. We did find indications, however, that responsible agency officials had not provided needed direction, supervision, and control of volunteer activities.

As evidenced by our previous work at other locations, however, it appears that problems involving ineffective utilization and inadequate supervision of volunteers are not unique to the agency at Sisseton. In our report to the Congress on our overall review of economic opportunity programs (B-130515, March 18, 1969), we pointed out that volunteers at some of the VISTA projects we reviewed could have been more effectively utilized and that one of the reasons the volunteers were not more productive at certain locations was the lack of adequate supervision by the projects' sponsors and supervisors.

To assess whether volunteers were productively employed, we requested agency officials to provide us with records or reports showing VISTA activities and accomplishments. The officials informed us that, before August 1969, such pertinent records and documents as VISTA job descriptions and reports on volunteer activities had not been maintained.

An OEO evaluation report of the VISTA project at Sisseton was prepared in July 1969. This report was complimentary of the VISTA activities in general, but did indicate that certain problems had been encountered during the initial stages of the project. The report stated that both the agency and the volunteers were of the view that the volunteers who were assigned to the agency during the early months of the project did not have a full understanding of their intended tasks or the self-confidence to perform them. The report further indicated that the effectiveness of the volunteers may have been less than expected because of a lack of close supervision.

The need for closer supervision and direction of volunteer activities was recognized by the agency in April 1969 when it applied for a VISTA grant to hire a full-time supervisor for the project. The agency stated in its grant application that overall coordination of the volunteers had never been a reality and that accomplishments had tended to be individual and scattered.

OEO approved the grant, and in June 1969 a full-time supervisor was employed by the agency. There was evidence that after the employment of the full-time supervisor significant improvements in the direction, supervision, and control of volunteer activities had taken place. For example, following the supervisor's employment, formal job descriptions were prepared for each volunteer and each volunteer was required to submit a monthly activity report.

Another factor contributing to more effective utilization of the volunteers during the summer of 1969 was an agency-sponsored VISTA summer associates project. OEO assigned five graduate students from the University of Michigan to the agency as VISTA associates from May to August to work with the agency and local residents and to supplement and assist the ongoing VISTA efforts. During their assignment the associates were able to initiate projects in several areas of community need that had been identified in the agency's original VISTA project proposal. These associates also involved regular volunteers in the new projects and provided them with needed training and on-the-job experience.

At the time that our fieldwork was completed, volunteers were assigned to economic development, health and welfare, education, recreational, and other community action projects. The available monthly activity reports submitted by volunteers from August 1969 through January 1970, revealed that in general, they were performing activities related to their assigned projects and were reporting achievements resulting from their efforts.

USE OF GOVERNMENT-OWNED VEHICLES  
BY VISTA VOLUNTEERS

There was a general lack of accountability for and control over the use of many of the 21 GSA vehicles which had been assigned to the agency through January 1970. Complete and accurate vehicle-use records were not maintained that would permit an adequate review of whether volunteer-driven vehicles had been used for appropriate job-related purposes.

VISTA instructions require that a volunteer authorized to use a vehicle for job-related purposes fill out a vehicle-use justification form which, among other things, establishes the number of miles the volunteer is authorized to drive each month. The form also provides for the identification of the primary driver and of any other person authorized to use the vehicle and for a detailed description of the vehicles intended use.

It is the responsibility of the VISTA regional program officer and the agency to verify that all mileage claimed as on-the-job transportation has been incurred in the performance of tasks specifically assigned by the agency and directly related to the agency's program activities. To further establish responsibility for vehicle maintenance and use, VISTA instructions

specify that GSA vehicles not be transferred among volunteers without VISTA regional office authorization.

Our examination of agency and VISTA regional office records revealed that required vehicle-use justification forms were either not on file or were not kept current to show changes in vehicle assignments. In an October 10, 1969, letter to the VISTA supervisor, the VISTA area coordinator stated that there was confusion in his office as to which vehicles were being used by the various volunteers, and he requested that the primary and other authorized drivers be identified. The area coordinator also indicated that vehicles were being switched among volunteers so that specified monthly mileage limitations would not be exceeded. In our review we identified six instances where vehicles had been transferred from one volunteer to another without the required VISTA regional office approval.

Also, VISTA instructions require that each GSA vehicle be used only for specific, job-related tasks and that, as a means of controlling the use of such vehicles, data for each trip be recorded in a monthly mileage report. The required data includes the date of each trip, odometer readings at the beginning and conclusion of each trip, and a complete description of the purpose of each trip. The agency is required to certify that mileage shown on the monthly report is reasonable and consistent with the volunteers' assigned duties. Our examination revealed that less than half of the required mileage reports were on file. About half of the reports that were on file did not contain either the required trip description or the required mileage information.

We inquired from area law enforcement agency officials whether any formal complaints, traffic violations, or other incidents involving GSA vehicles had been reported. The officials informed us that there was no record of violations or formal complaints but that one of the VISTA-assigned GSA vehicles had been reported as having been stolen and wrecked by unknown persons. The Federal Bureau of Investigation investigated the circumstances surrounding the theft and destruction of the vehicle that had occurred in September 1969. Bureau officials informed us on June 16, 1970, that their investigation had not revealed the identities of the persons responsible for the theft and destruction, that no further action was contemplated, and that the case was considered closed.

We noted that, although there had been a lack of accountability for and control over the use of GSA vehicles, in the months following the employment of the full-time supervisor increased emphasis had been placed on obtaining volunteer compliance with established vehicle-use instructions.

In January 1970, we observed the general appearance of the GSA vehicles assigned to the agency and noted that all 10 of the vehicles assigned were in reasonably good condition.

VOLUNTEER INFLUENCE ON THE COMMUNITY

We solicited the views of approximately 40 persons who either lived or worked in the Sisseton area concerning the charge that the volunteers were a disruptive influence on the community. Many of those whom we interviewed expressed their personal dissatisfaction with the volunteers and their activities, particularly their personal habits or conduct, and asserted that the volunteers, in general, were disruptive to the community. None of the complaints suggested that the volunteers had caused any major disturbances in the area.

In most cases the individuals making the complaints had based them on hearsay or rumors, some of the individuals referred us to other persons who supposedly had direct knowledge of the volunteers' activities. Our follow-up interviews with persons to whom we were referred were generally unsuccessful in substantiating the complaints but often resulted in our receiving additional complaints which also could not be substantiated.

Although our interviews indicated that a segment of the community, which was represented by the persons we interviewed, did not hold certain of the volunteers in high esteem, we did not determine the extent to which this feeling prevailed throughout the entire community.

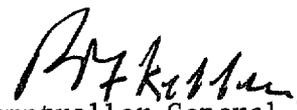
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Your attention is invited to the fact that the individuals and organizations mentioned in this report have not been given the opportunity to formally examine and comment on its contents. Copies of this report are being sent today to Senator Mundt. As agreed with Mr. O'Brien of your staff and Senator Mundt's office, we are sending copies of this report to the Director, OEO, for his information and for any action that he may deem to be appropriate.

We plan to make no further distribution of the report unless copies are specifically requested, and then distribution will be made only after your agreement has been obtained or public announcement has been made by you concerning the contents of the report.

We trust that the above information will be of assistance to you.

Sincerely yours,



Assistant

Comptroller General  
of the United States

The Honorable John L. McClellan, Chairman  
Committee on Government Operations  
United States Senate